

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Hank Aaron
1934 - -

Baseball player, born February 5, 1934 in Mobile, Alabama. As an African-American, Aaron was raised in a segregated part of town, and the house where he and his seven siblings grew up did not have plumbing, electricity or glass windows. He was born in the midst of the great depression, and his parents struggled to keep ahead of debts. His father worked at the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company. Herbert Aaron encouraged his kids to excel in school. Young Henry was a good student, but from an early age he knew he wanted to play pro baseball. He spent much of his spare time at Carver Park, a neighborhood playground near his home, playing sandlot baseball and teaching himself the game.

When Hank was a teenager, pro baseball slowly began integration with arrival of Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play in the major leagues. While Robinson was enduring taunts and death threats, Aaron was making a name for himself in Mobile, playing in local amateur and semi-pro leagues, teams such as the Pritchett Athletics and the Mobile Black Bears. In time, Hank's talents attracted the attention of Syd Pollock, owner of the Indianapolis Clowns, a professional Negro League team. Hank joined the Clowns in 1952, at pay of \$200 a month, to play in the Negro League. Armed with two sandwiches and two dollars from his mom, he took the train to Indianapolis to join the team.

Shortly after joining the Clowns, Hank was recruited by the Milwaukee Braves and became one of the first black players to break the color line in the deep south. After one season in Milwaukee, he found himself playing in Jacksonville, Florida in the South Atlantic League, enduring racial slurs from fans and even some of his own teammates.

Despite the many problems, Hank excelled during his year with the South Atlantic League, leading the circuit in batting average, doubles, runs scored, total bases and runs batted in. He was voted League Most Valuable Player in 1953. The following year, a key injury opened a roster spot with the Braves in Milwaukee. He soon became the Braves' starting right fielder, quickly earning a reputation for speed and power. With his help, the Braves advanced to the 1957 World Series against the New York Yankees.

In the ensuing years, Hank Aaron built a distinguished record in the major leagues. He played throughout the 60's in Milwaukee and Atlanta. In the early 70's, his base hit and home run records began to gain media attention and fame found him. He was honored with the famous candy bar "O Henry", and was offered many lucrative endorsement contracts. However, his fame brought a spate of hate letters also, some threatening his children. If anything, however, hate mail increased his desire to break old records. He began the 1974 season by tying the Babe Ruth record during an Opening Day game in Cincinnati.

Aaron left the Braves at the end of 1974 and finished his playing days with the Milwaukee Brewers, retiring in 1976 with a record 755 home runs and 2297 runs batted in. He then joined the Atlanta Braves in the front office, working in player development, one of the first African Americans hired in a major league front office.

Now retired, Hank Aaron lives near Atlanta with his wife, children and grandchildren.